

ATF: Deja Vu

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Summary: Chris Larabee's faith is shaken when one of the Seven is injured.

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Author- Maria Villa

Disclaimer- They're not mine, blah, blah, blah. The ATF universe was started by Mog and went from there

Notes- a Chris angst fic.

Everything was in a blur. Pictures were moving before him with an amazing amount of speed and he barely had time to review them all. Suddenly, time stood still and there moving in the ethereal light, was the slender figure of his wife scrambling eggs for breakfast. Gracefully, she lifted her head and smiled at her husband, her smile as radiant as she was. A little boy ran from the living room and immediately jumped up into his father's arms. He swung the little boy in a graceful arc, and during that time the boy in his strong arms giggled and screamed for more.

He set him down and moved over to his now laughing wife. He breathed in the sweet scent of lilacs on her hair and wrapped his strong arms around her slim waist. He closed his eyes, taking in every minute of this Monday morning.

Suddenly, his arms were empty and when he opened his eyes, his wife kissed him on cheek and climbed into his car. In the passenger seat, his son waved good-bye to him and she sped off to work and to drop off their son. About twenty yards away, her delicate hand poked out the window to wave good-bye. He had barely lifted his hand mimic the

gesture when a loud

explosion erupted and he was thrown to the ground.

Slightly fazed, he glanced back toward the location of the explosion and witnessed his car moving slowly to the edge road, fire engulfing the interior. His mind barely registered the horrific scene and flat out denial that it was his car that exploded.

He limply got to his feet, took a tentative step forward and then another. When the car finally came to a stop, the awful truth hit him and he started running. Faintly in the background, sirens pierced the morning air and people started to emerge from their homes, gaping openly as the blonde agent stumbled to the wreckage.

But he was too late, the car bomb had taken the lives of his wife and son and with that, destroyed the life that Chris Larabee loved so much. . .

Chris sat straight up on his bed, his body drenched with sweat. He looked forlornly at the empty spot next to him and ran quaking hands through his unruly hair. Another Monday morning. He tossed the denim comforter aside and swiftly moved to his desk, picking up the Garfield desktop calendar JD had given him for his birthday. It had yesterday's date on it, and he slowly tore away the sheet of paper and crumpled it in his hand, revealing the date below. August 23, 1999. It would have been Adam's ninth birthday. It was also the day his family was taken away from him. He tossed the paper in the wastebasket and headed to the kitchen, where a strong pot of coffee waited for him.

Chris poured the coffee into a well-used cup and went to sit outside. A cold gusty wind greeted him when he opened the door but he didn't mind. He sat on wooden bench and leaned back, taking in the beauty of the countryside. The agent reviewed his life since that tragic incident and wondered how he was able to survive those three years. He knew he was

greatly indebted to Buck Wilmington, an old friend and partner from their days with the San Antonio Police. Buck had and still was, trying to keep his friend from digging himself in a grave. But he also knew it was the friendship he forged with five other men that he found life was worth living.

The Magnificent Seven. That's what the other teams called them. They had the best track record this side of the Mississippi. (And also ended up at the hospital more often.) When he began to assemble his team, he knew he wanted Buck with him. Vin, former bounty hunter and ex-military, somehow was able to find a niche in his cold exterior and found a place in his heart. Josiah, formally NYPD, grounded the group with his cool facade and helpful

advice. Nathan, with his calming personality and resourcefulness helped the team in more ways than one. Ezra, the undercover agent and also the black sheep of this little family also gotten to him, even though he could be damn trying at times. And JD, the youngest of the Seven; Chris thought of him as a little brother, one that had to be constantly looked after. Although, Buck did a pretty good job of that already.

Chris finished his coffee and headed to the bathroom to take a shower. He had a meeting to get to this morning. There was a new case of high importance given to Team Seven and they had a minimal time to act upon it.

As the hot water poured from the shower head, he surprisingly didn't feel so moody or depressed as usual when this date rolled around. He smiled to himself, knowing it was six other men that gave something back to him, his life.

As he was changing into a pair of black jeans and a buttoned down black shirt, Chris noticed the light on answering machine was blinking. 'Uh, someone musta have called while I was takin' a shower.' he thought. He pressed the blinking red button and listened.

"You have one message," the electronic voice intoned.

Buck's boisterous voice boomed from the machine. "Hey Buddy, I think I left the manila folder on the Digby case on the coffee table, so can ya bring it with ya? Or else Ezra is gonna have my hide when I don't have it for him. Thanks Buddy!" Click.

"End of message."

Chris smiled. It always seemed that Buck would find something at his place every time he came over. Either it was his sunglasses, or his wallet, and now the folder. 'Maybe I should start charging him for delivery,' he thought.

He quickly finished getting ready, grabbed the folder on the coffee table and his keys and headed out the door.

Five men were sitting in the conference waiting for two more members of their group to arrive. Some of them occupied their time with less than office related dealings.

"He shoots. . ."

Josiah was busily writing some notes for the meeting when the flying projectile found its way on his desk. He picked up the perfectly folded triangular piece of paper and pretended to look annoyed at the person who was meant as the recipient.

JD looked at him guiltlessly. He had tried to make decent goal posts with his hands, but with his left arm in a sling, his attempt was meager at best. So he blamed the kicker. "I can't help that Buck is lousy in flag football."

Buck snorted at his young friend. "At least I'm not lousy with the ladies."

Before JD could counter, Ezra breezed into the conference room. "Good morning gentlemen," Ezra said as he took a seat next to Vin. He took a sip of his cappuccino and looked pointedly at Buck. "Pray tell, Mr. Wilmington, but do you have the file that I handed to you on Friday?"

"I. . . uh. . ."

Buck fumbled. He had hoped Chris would be in by now to avoid this, but for once, Ezra was actually on time for a

meeting.

"Forgot it at my place," Chris finished as he walked into the conference. He tossed the folder to his undercover specialist.

"Alright boys," Chris began, "word has it that there is an informant within the FBI selling information. This guy as already caused the death of three agents. Word from above is that they were able to pin down the guy the rogue agent as been selling to." The leader pulled out another manila folder and tossed to Ezra. "His name is Frank Chaverci, and he's from Kentucky. Ezra you'll go in as him. They've never met face to face, the agent only had dealings with Chaverci through his assistant. He'll accompany you on the meet."

Ezra flipped through the folder, trying to get a feel for this man. 'Umm, Southerner, well I fit description already' he thought smiling ruefully. It also seemed Chaverci had a fondness for expensive classic cars; he would need to need to rent a one for the meet today. His Jaguar, although pricey, just wouldn't fit the bill.

"It goes down at five o' clock today," Chris continued. "JD, Buck, you two are on surveillance, the rest of us on backup. Any questions?"

"Yeah," Vin drawled. "Why is this an ATF matter? Sounds like internal affairs should be dealin' with this one."

"It seems the rogue agent has been giving the access codes to the gun caches at the places where the military keeps theirs. The places are mostly in the Denver area so we got the call." Chris waited to see if anyone had anymore questions. When no one voiced their opinions he said, "All right, that's it for today boys, get hoppin'."

JD and Buck still slightly giddy from earlier, said in unison, "Let's go to the hop!" stood up, and bounced out of the conference room. Their mismatched, off-key voices could be heard from down the hall.

"Let's go to the hop! Yeah!"

"I hope the aren't like this the rest of the day," Nathan replied, shaking his head good naturally at the antics of the brother-like duo.

"Trust me Mr. Jackson," Ezra drawled, "they'll be like this all week." Then in an after thought, 'And how they can be this giddy on a Monday morning is beyond me.'

While JD went to get some coffee from the break room, Buck Wilmington was whistling merrily toward his office when the seven's secretary, Mrs. Staci Brooks stopped him. "Buck?"

"Yes darlin' whatcha need?"

Mrs. Brooks blushed furiously. Even though she was fifty and was going to retire soon, Buck always made her feel young again. He always made her laugh and treated the graying woman with respect; so did the rest of the seven. She been their secretary for almost a year and had gotten to know all of them quite well. She remembered quite

well the antics he played during her impromptu fifth birthday party at the office.

"Buck Wilmington how many times have I told you 'darlin' is not my given name?" she teased.

"Only once," he smiled. When she gave him one of those looks, he amended, "at least today."

She slapped him on the shoulder with a folder and looked at him exasperated. JD walked in with two cups of coffee in time to see her do this.

"Is he giving you trouble Staci?"

"Nah, the usual," she said as she smiled at the youngest of the seven. JD passed a cup over to Buck and he took a tentative sip of the hot liquid. Buck made a face at the strength of the coffee.

"Dang, ain't Josiah ever heard of 'cleanin' the pot'?"

JD smiled inwardly as Staci handed him a disk. He didn't mind the strong stuff, as long it woke him up in the mornin'. And Josiah's coffee did just that. "Here's what you need JD, and Buck, there is someone waitin' for you in your office."

"Really?" Buck asked, his curiosity piqued. "Who?"

"He didn't give his name. All he said was 'pie' incident when you were a rookie. Did you actually did what he told me?"

"Well I'll be. . ." Buck exclaimed and practically ran toward his office.

He walked in the door finding Jack Travers sitting in his chair. Jack gave him a killer smile. "Nice place you got here Buck," Jack said as he casually leaned back in the chair. "It looks prettier than a picture box."

Buck's face erupted into one of his famous smiles, the ones that made the ladies swoon. "Well in looks a lot better than the hole in a wall you called an office back in San Antonio," he said as he leaned against the door jam.

Jack shrugged his shoulders. "Can't I help it if the captain failed to see I needed a promotion to better working conditions?"

Buck shook head, Jack was his usual wisecracking self. "You and Ezra would get along fine."

"Who?" Jack asked.

Buck wasn't paying attention since he noticed his boss walking down the hall and hollered at him. "Hey Chris! Look at want decided to pay us a visit!"

The black-clad agent walked toward him and peeked into his office. On rare occasions did Chris Larabee get shocked, so call this rare time. "Jack? Jack Travers?"

"Hey, Firecracker!" Jack yelled, using his nickname from back when. "What are you up to these days?"

Chris smiled a genuine smile and approached his long time friend. "Same old, same old. Tryin' to keep the bad guys off the street. How about you?"

"Not much," Jack replied as he rose from Buck's chair clapped the man in the back. "I've got some business down this ways, so I thought I'll drop on by."

"Glad you did pard," Buck chimed in. "It's been what? Six years since we last heard from ya?"

"More like seven."

Jack, Chris and Buck had been all down in the San Antonio police department twelve years ago. Through the years they had gone on to bigger and better things; Chris had quickly risen through the ranks because of his exceptional leadership skills. He had a commanding presence and demanded the respect of those around him and he got it. After being caught up in one of the most tragic incidents in San Antonio police history, in which twenty innocent lives were lost in a deadly shootout between gangs. He dedicated himself to getting guns off the streets, hence his calling to the Denver Branch of the ATF.

Buck had also stuck around, but after five years, he accepted a new position in LA. However, he had kept in close touch with his old partner. When Chris had called him to join the elite group, he couldn't resist.

Jack Travers had stayed with the San Antonio police and the last thing Chris and Buck heard from the married man was he was the head of the FBI for the West Coast.

'He looks well,' Chris mused to himself. A faint scar graced Jack's right cheek, a small reminder of the time Jack saved Chris' life.

"Look Jack," Chris said, "as much as I would like to go over old times, me and the boys are pretty busy this morning. Why don't we meet for an early lunch?"

"No problem Chris, I have a couple of things to take care of before my meeting this afternoon." He stood up and walked over to the both of them. "How about 11 over at the Rodizio Grill?"

"Whooooee! I love that place!" cried Buck. He clapped the younger man on the back. "It's gonna be your treat right?"

Jack looked at his friend incredulously. "Who said that you were comin'?"

Buck put on his best hurt expression. "Aw, come on now Jack! You jus' can't let our usual bet go to waste!

"Bet?" a southern voice drawled. Ezra Standish approached the little group with his briefcase in hand. "I do love the sound of that word.

May I ask what is the wager?" The southerner didn't notice the Jack at first.

Chris made the introductions. "Ezra, I like for ya to met and old friend of ours, Jack Travers. Jack, this Ezra Standish, our undercover specialist."

"Pleasure meeting you Mr. Travers," Ezra greeted, but as he shook the man's hand, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. The undercover agent was an excellent judge of character, he had to be, if he were to survive the rigorous demands of his chosen field. There was something about this man that screamed danger, but what exactly it could be, he didn't know. Plus, Chris just said that he was an old friend and he did feel like voicing his concerns just yet. The wrath of a Larabee was not a good idea to deal with, especially on a Monday morning. He turned up the charm and acted cool and collected.

"So, gentlemen, what is this I hear about bet."

Chris shook his head good naturally as Buck launched into one of his infamous stories. At least it was one of his less colorful ones.

"Well ya see," Buck began, "back in the old days, me and Jack would bet who would get the most phone numbers. Every time we were down the ole' bar, the bet was on." He glanced to his old friend rather mischievously. "Got pretty good at it too, won most of the time. There wasn't a lady who could resist my animal magnetism."

"You mean animal maggotism, Buck," JD yelled as he walked down the hall.

"Good Lord, Mr. Wilmington, how chivalrous of you, to take on the game of chance," Ezra teased.

"Say what you what to say Ez, but I'll still el champion," Buck exclaimed has he wiggled his mustache mischievously.

Jack rolled his eyes at the egregious man. "You definitely haven't changed." He glanced at his watch. "I need to get goin'. Eleven is okay right?"

"Yeah, that's fine," Chris said. "Buck and I will see ya there."

Jack nodded his head slightly. "It was nice meetin' you fellas," he said and walked out the door. He headed for the elevator, smiling warmly at the secretary. The elevator doors slid open, revealing no one to accompany him for the ride down. As soon as the doors closed, Jack Travers slumped against the rail and tiredly rubbed his eyes. The reflection he saw in the

mirror was of a face haunted, full of disappointment. The last two years hadn't been easy for him. How his life had fallen apart so quickly was beyond his comprehension.

It took every ounce of effort to keep up the cool facade in front of Buck and Chris. He was sure that the undercover agent, Ezra Standish, had seen through his mask. The legend of the Magnificent Seven were well known in law enforcement circles and a man of his rank had easy

access to the men's personal files. Jack felt a certain pride as he read of the exploits of

Chris and his team, as if they were the only link to all that was good in his life.

The elevator doors opened to the lobby and Jack forced himself to look composed, as if there wasn't anything wrong in his life.

'Just a couple of hours, Jack, and you can drop all pretenses and head back home.' His polished shoes clicked softly on the marbled floor and the automatic doors slid open for him. He looked up at the sky and thought, 'Wherever that may be.'

Chris Larabee was busily typing at his computer when he felt it. Felt the itch that something was not right; everything felt heavy somehow. He saved the report he was working on and leaned back in his leather chair. Looking out the crystal clear sky, he wondered what travesty was about to happen. Realizing what he had just thought, he shook his head good-naturally. 'I am beginning to sound like Ezra,' he thought to himself.

The day started out well, unlike some anniversaries of his son and wife's death. Buck and JD were up to the usual antics this morning and an old friend he hadn't seen in years dropped by. The case Team Seven was currently working looked pretty run-of-the-mill stuff. Everything seemed good so far.

When he and Buck had lunch with Jack over at the Rodizio Grill, Jack seemed like his old self. They kidded around for a while, trading barbs, old stories, and catching up what they had missed over the past seven years.

Chris missed the old camaraderie they had together when they were young. Ever since his family's death, rarely did he set aside time for moments like these. Since the beginning of his career, he had the reputation of 'hard as nails' kind of guy, but since the death of his family that facade was edged with deep retching heartache which made him more dangerous. He quick to anger and had a hard time letting anyone get close.

However, one year ago it all changed. Team Seven was formed and the black clad leader slowly began to embrace life once again. True, Chris still clung to his dark emotions, but thanks to six co-workers, and more importantly friends, Chris Larabee had slowly climbed out of the dark hole where he once hid from the world.

But during the course of the meal, Chris sensed something was off in his old friend Jack. There was something in the way he moved, the way he talked that didn't seem normal to Chris. His movements were a little stiff and the sparkle of his blue eyes were dimmed.

Jack seemed to have become more sullen and melancholy over the years. It was the eyes that told the tale. Chris had always believed that no matter how well a person schooled his face to bear no emotion, the eyes were a dead giveaway to that person's soul. The eyes held the secrets and the pains of a person's life. And Jack's eyes were weary. The question was weary

of what?



::knock, knock::

A light rap on his office door interrupted his solitary musings. Chris swiveled his chair around and met the sparkling blue eyes of the sharpshooter, Vin Tanner.

"Hey there pard," Vin greeted his boss. "You about ready?"

Chris looked at the clock on the wall. Three o'clock. 'Where does the time go?' he thought to himself and he began to shut his computer down. "Yeah, let me straighten things around here a bit. I'll meet you guys downstairs," he said as he began to shuffle the pile of papers that had taken up permanent residence on his desk. It was time to sent up shop at the place Ezra and the rogue agent were meeting.

Vin stood in the doorway, watching his boss silently clean up his mess. He noticed his friend seemed a little tense. "Somethin' wrong?"

Chris paused in the middle of his work. He regarded his agent with earnest concern. "I got that feelin' again," he explained, "somethin' just ain't right about this whole thing."

"Chris you know we'll all be down there to back Ez up," Vin drawled. "Remember last month when all of went to that festival?"

The black-clad man remembered that day well. Shifting his gaze to the picture that sat on his desk, images filled his mind. There, in a simple wooden frame was a picture of the day events sitting on his desk. It was the annual Four Corners Harvest Festival, the entire weekend dedicated to the way the Old West used to be. They had one of those 'Back in Time' photo booths in which people could dress in clothes like those worn by people during that time period.

JD had managed to convince the others, with a classic puppy eyed face, to have a picture done. "After all, they were named after the legend of The Magnificent Seven so why not make it a tribute to them," he reasoned.

The other grudgingly complied, but soon got into the spirit of the era. There was nothing more fun than pretending to be someone else. Buck had dressed as a regular cowboy, a pair of tan pants, green shirt and a red bandana around his neck. Vin had also dressed in a similar style, except he wore a long buckskin jacket with a blue shirt that brought out the color in his eyes. Josiah and Nathan dressed similar fashion, black pants with a white shirt except Josiah had a wooden cross dangling from his neck and Nathan had on a black vest with a set of knives crisscrossing his chest.

JD found a hat that matched his hero, Bat Masterson complete with an authentic eastern outfit. Buck kept teasin' him that it wasn't a 'real' western hat. Wanting to be unique as he always, Ezra decided to dress like a gambler. To say he looked smashing would have been an understatement. Instead of choosing from his usual preference of muted colors, he choose to go with a brilliant scarlet coat, pin-striped black pants, and a gentleman's hat. Chris kept his usual black attire, but topped off the look with a long black duster.

"Yeah, I remember," Chris said, as he handed Vin the infamous photo. "Damn, I can't believe JD convinced all of us to pose. At least Ezra looks better in red than in that purple dress." The two friends laughed at that one.

"Then JD had to go on that 'rescue' and break his arm."

"I thought Buck would give him a whuppin' right then and there!"

Vin's broad smile reached his eyes. He was proud to be a part of this team. They had been through hell with each other, but some how managed to pull through. "Well then, I'll met ya out front," and Vin brought up two fingers and gave a small salute, a tradition that Ezra had started at the festival and that the team quickly adopted.

Chris placed the photograph back in it's proper place. He absentmindedly twirled the single brass antique spur that was next to it. Like the photograph from the Harvest Festival, the brass spur served as a reminder of how the members of Team Seven had grown close to each other.

Buck had bought a pair at an antique store and spilt them among Chris and Vin, acknowledging the growing friendship between the two men. The leader knew that no matter what happened, the seven friends would always be there for each other.

Chris smiled into the empty room. He hoped his foreboding feeling would go away. 'Maybe it was because of the jitters that this day always brought,' he thought to himself. He grabbed his gun from the drawer, and put it in its holster. Grabbing his short black leather jacket, he headed out the door.

"Where the hell is he?" Chris growled as he checked his watch for the fifth time.

"Don't worry Chris," Josiah said from the discreet gray-colored van, "I'm sure that our lost lamb will get here soon."

Six members of the elite team plus McCarthy, Chaverci's assistant, were waiting out by the loading docks, waiting for the seventh. "Where did he say he was goin'?" Chris yelled at his team.

JD shrugged his shoulders, wincing slightly at the small pain it caused. He was going to monitor the entire exchange between Ezra and the rogue agent. "He said he needed to pick up somethin' for the meet today."

"Well, what could be that important that he . . . eeeeeee . . ."

Chris began to say but trailed off as a beautiful old classic car made it's way around the corner with Ezra at the wheel. The six team members gaped openly as Ezra pulled up next to them, calmly removed his Armani sunglasses and placed them above his head.

"Gentlemen," Ezra drawled his melodramatic voice, "may I introduce you a classic 1954 Jaguar XK120 Roadster," he said as he padded the hood. "Fully restored and a steal for a mere 85,000."

Buck waved his hand expansively over the car. "Wha. . . where did ya

get that?" he managed to say.

"It's mine," Ezra grinned widely, showing off his gold tooth. The six men could hardly keep their jaws off the floor. "Gentlemen, you can close your mouths now or a fly may decide to reside inside its depths."

"You're jokin' right? About the car, I mean." Nathan asked. "Please tell me you're jokin'."

"Mr. Jackson," Ezra replied, his voice taking a slightly offended tone, "a gentleman does not joke."

"So it *is* yours?" Buck said jumping in.

"Yes, it is mine. . . for the day," Ezra grinned as his comrades understood; they realized they had just been conned. "A dealer downtown owned me a hefty favor, so today I called in that courtesy."

Chris couldn't help but smile. Ezra was the best at what he did. Otherwise he wouldn't be a part of this team, this family. "Alright boys, you...." he said, pointing at McCarthy, "go with Standish." He walked up to the slightly scared man and seethed, "If you try anythin' you're gonna be sorry you were ever born."

Chris turned to the rest of his team. "Buck, Josiah, Nathan, and JD....go ahead and take the van. Vin, you're with me." The men nodded, checked their clips, and headed toward the van.

Vin was already in the truck as Chris climbed into his Dodge. He had given some last minute instructions to his undercover agent and started the engine, heading off to the warehouse on Locust and Third. They would park across the street a half a block away, with the rest of the team sitting in a parking lot about a block from their target. Vin tapped the microphone on his shirt lightly and said, "JD, ya hear me?"

"Yeah Vin, I hear ya," JD replied loud and clear.

"Is Ezra's mike workin' properly?"

"Does hearin' him listenin' to opera qualify as a yes?" JD replied, as he made a face in distaste. His musical tastes were a world away from the undercover agent. His taste leaned more toward Smashing Pumpkins than Pavarotti.

Vin laughed out loud and Chris looked at him curiously. "JD was refferin' to Ez's music habits."

Chris nodded in understanding and smiled slightly as braked for a red light. Chris knew that everything was going well. So why did he feel that all hell was about to break lose?

Ezra Standish pulled up next to the warehouse. He checked to make sure that his mike was functioning properly and his gun fully loaded. 'One must be always be prepared,' he thought to himself. He quickly glanced down the street and saw the rest of the team in position "All right," he said, turning to McCarthy, "lead the way."

Both cars were in there places and Vin had his binoculars out, sweeping the area for any potential threat. He knew the rest of team inside the van were doing the same.

A black Ford Mustang with a California license plate pulled up behind the classic Jaguar. The windows were tinted so the team members were unable to see the driver.

"Looks like we got a live one," Vin announced.

"Alright fellas, on your toes for this one. The sooner this is done, the sooner we can get home," Chris announced over the microphone system.

"Damn!" Vin suddenly cursed.

"What?"

"Damn truck just pulled up next to the cars! I can't see a damn thing!"

"Aw hell! Buck, you see anythin'?" Chris yelled.

"Sorry pard, but that truck is in the way."

"Damn, damn, damn!" Chris cursed. The truck moved out of the way, just in time for the six men to see the door to the entrance of the warehouse close. "Alright boys, let's move into positions." Chris and Vin quickly opened the doors and saw the gray van's doors open as well. They carefully made their way across the street when gunshots filled the afternoon air.

Ezra Standish was patiently waiting for his meeting with rogue agent, unlike McCarthy who kept on fidgeting. Ezra felt like shootin' the man. Nervous people made him nervous. He usually thrived on situations like these. It was what he was best at, manipulating people into the game. His mother always said to him that he was wastin' his God given gifts by working in law enforcement, but he knew this was his true calling. Slowly, but stubbornly, Ezra had learned to call the six men he worked with friends. But today he was overwhelmed with a sense of dread.

He snapped back to attention as the door to the room opened. Ezra began to speak in greeting, but the words died in his mouth.

"Travers?" he whispered in the quiet room.

It was a moment in time when everything stood still. Shock and realization coursed through Standish and Travers. Ezra felt an immediate wave of sorrow and regret learning that Travers was the traitor.

When Jack Travers saw Chris' co-worker standing there, he reacted without thinking. He removed his gun from concealment and fired. Ezra barely registered the hot-laced pain coursing through his chest. He fell mercilessly to the floor, and into oblivion.

Chris flinched as the sound of gunfire filled the afternoon air. 'Oh no, not Ezra,' he thought to himself 'Please not Ezra.' He quickly

turned to the rest of his team and motioned for them for them to split up. Buck and JD headed towards the back while Josiah and Nathan covered the alleyway.

Chris and Vin steadily made their way to the rusted metal door and waited for the rest of the team to get into position. "On three Team Seven," he announced over the mike. "One. . . Two. . . Three!" At the same time, the back and front doors opened. "Freeze! ATF!" Chris yelled as the remaining members of Team 7 rushed in.

His words echoed across the empty room. Empty except for the bodies laying on the cold cement floor.

Gut-wrenching fear clenched Chris Larabee's heart as he saw his undercover agent sprawled face down. He grabbed the mike and yelled for Nathan to get inside. He also called for Josiah to call the paramedics. As Vin and Chris raced over to Ezra's inert form, he shouted, "Buck, JD search the place! He has to be in here somewhere!" The pair nodded and began a methodical search of the surrounding area.

Chris cringed as he almost slipped in the growing pool of blood surrounding Ezra. As he knelt down by his fallen friend, he registered the growing paleness of his friend's features. He was afraid to feel his neck for a pulse, fearing he wouldn't find anything.

He looked at Vin, anguish clearly visible in his green eyes. But instead of seeing Vin kneeling across from him, Sarah's gentle face stared back at him. He shook his head violently, trying to clear the vision from his mind, but she was still there. She looked down at Ezra and moved to touch the fallen agent's neck.

"He's still alive," Vin breathed out with relief. The sharpshooter glanced at Chris and saw something painful, something distant in his friend's eyes. "Chris?" he called. But he received no answer. "Chris!" he yelled again, this time shaking his friend's shoulder as well.

Almost immediately Chris snapped out his trace, but confusion marred his face. Why would he see her face now? 'I need to concentrate in the present, not the past,' he thought to himself.

Nathan hurried over to the pair and quickly assessed the situation. Since he was the only one with any real medical training, the rest of the men depended on his knowledge during critical situations. "We gotta stop the bleeding," he said. "Give me your handkerchief Vin."

The sharpshooter immediately removed the article of clothing and handed it to Nathan's waiting hands. As Vin and Chris proceeded to carefully roll Ezra into a more comfortable position, Nathan checked out McCarthy who laid unmoving only a few feet from Ezra. The healer shook his head; McCarthy had not survived the shootout. In the background, sirens whirled in the air. The front door opened once again, and Josiah rushing to group.

"They're on their way," Josiah said breathlessly. "How is he Nate?"

Nathan quickly ripped Ezra's shirt open and applied pressure to the wound. The handkerchief quickly absorbed the flowing thick liquid. "We need that ambulance now," Nathan replied worriedly. "He can't afford to lose too much blood and there is no tellin' how much damage the bullet has done."

Chris slumped back, paying no attention to the blood on his boots. Instead, his mind was elsewhere. 'He looks so pale,' he thought to himself, 'and so young.' Ezra was one of those guys that was hard to get to know. The undercover agent had, at first, he kept himself apart from the others. Chris had thought it was his damn arrogance and his reputation as a maverick, but as the months ticked away, he saw a different man. The others had seen the change too.

Ezra didn't have an easy childhood, always being shipped to boarding schools and not having a lot of friends. His mother was not that much of a help either, as the team learned during one particular lunch.

Chris was pulled from his thoughts by the illumination of the lights from the ambulance. Soon after, the paramedics came bursting through the door with a gurney. Nathan relinquished control to more experienced hands.

Buck and JD returned from their search of the surrounding area. Buck cringed as he saw Ezra being wheeled out the door. Vin accompanied the fallen man. Buck tiredly drew his hand across his face, afraid of the reaction Chris would have when he told him the news that they had lost track of their quarry. Somehow, he had been able to creep out from under the very noses of one of the best law enforcement team in the country. He knew Chris' infamous anger would show its light on this day.

Members of the Denver police department began to close off the area. The officer in charge of the scene approached the men. "We'll take care of things at this end Chris," Officer Beckman said. He had great respect for Larabee and his team as did many of the officers within the Denver Police Department. Team Seven didn't have to deal with mundane process of securing the area with one of their own hurt. Beckman knew that the team would want to be with their injured friend.

The leader nodded and headed for the door, his fists clenched with anger. He wanted to punch something, preferably the person who did this to Ezra. He watched as Ezra was loaded into the ambulance with a variety of tubes stuck in him. Chris knew how bad the situation was. If Ezra died, he wouldn't be able to live with himself.

Chris watched as Vin climbed into the ambulance with Ezra. Vin saluted the black-clad leader before climbing in, reassuring Chris that he would watch over the slick undercover agent.

"Chris?" a somewhat hesitant voice asked.

He turned his head to Buck and said, "Where is that son of a bitch?"

Buck braced himself for what was about to come next. "We lost him."

Chris' eyes widen. How could two of his men let a damn rogue agent slip away? He saw that the Ford Mustang was still parked behind the Jag. He stepped close to his friend, his green eyes burning a hole into Buck. "How in the hell could you lose him?!" He waved his hand over to the Mustang, frustrated at Buck's lack of response. "His car is still here!"

"Hell Chris, I have no idea!" Buck practically yelled, frustrated at his inability to track the man who had caused so much pain in Chris Larabee's face, in all of their faces. "We searched in every nook and cranny, but there was no sign of him!" Buck paused for a moment and ran a hand through his dark brown hair. "How's Ezra?"

"Not good," Nathan replied. "Come on Chris," he said as he laid a gentle hand on Chris' shoulder. He wanted to stop the two before the situation got out of hand. "Let's get over to the hospital. Ezra wouldn't be exactly too happy if we stand around here and start blaming each other."

'They don't have to say it. I already blame myself,' Chris thought. He should have looked at this case more thoroughly, gotten more information before throwing his undercover agent into that kind of a situation. 'I should have listened to my gut. Oh God, why didn't I listen!'

He ran a shaky hand over his short blonde hair and breathed out slowly. "Get that car impounded. I want it dusted for fingerprints and searched for anything that could be important. Also, ask Beckman to check for any shell casings left at the scene and have him thoroughly search the place for anything that was missed the first time around."

The ambulance began to pull away, the sirens screeching in the dying light of the Monday afternoon. Chris watched it go, hoping and praying that his family wouldn't be torn apart this day. 'Not again,' he thought to himself. 'Not again.' Clenching his jaw, he fought against the tears that threaten to spill. He hadn't cried in a long time, not since his family's death. He wasn't about to start now, although it was damn close.

"Let's follow them," Chris said, and he headed for his Dodge at the end of the block. Buck accompanied him.

"He'll be all right Chris," Buck said softly as they climbed into truck.

"He better be," as he started up the engine, staring straight head. "Ez still owes me a report or two."

Buck smiled ever so slightly and turned his head to watch the passing scenery, his mind wandering elsewhere. Had he been concentrating, he would have noticed the man that watched the Dodge as it drove off, following the ambulance on its way to the hospital.

Jack Travers slumped tiredly against the brick wall as the truck disappeared and became a tiny speck in the distance. From the safety of the alleyway, Jack Travers watched the situation brew. More police cars had arrived on the scene and he watched heartbroken as Chris climbed into his truck with Buck at his side. He knew then he had lost them. Lost the deep binding friendship they once had when they

worked down in San Antonio.

He was able to slip out through one of the many steel grates that were located in various locations in the warehouse and watched the entire situation unfold. Even from afar, Jack could see the deep lines of concern that Chris had for his comrades.

'What have I done? I didn't mean for this to happen!' he silently berated himself. Chris and Buck was his only link to the time of his life when everything was good. Now he was a traitor to his profession, he had hurt the few people he trusted with his life. 'I have nothing to go back to, nothing to live for.'

He crumpled to the ground, holding his knees tightly to his body. "What I'm I going to do now?" he whispered in cool night air.

Tick. Tick. Tick. The clock, which hung above the door of the waiting room, moved ever so slowly passed the eight. Chris Larabee had been pacing around the waiting room for forty

minutes. The noise of the clock was getting to him. "Oh, if I could just shoot that

damn thing," Chris whispered as he grabbed hold of his pounding head. "It would

help alleviate the frustration that I am feeling."

Vin had been waiting patiently in front of the emergency entrance for Chris and the others. He told them the nurses wouldn't let him pass into the surgery room and shushed him into the waiting room. The sharpshooter couldn't stand waiting in there so he went outside to meet the rest of the guys.

The others had positioned themselves in various spots about the room. JD had been staring at the same page in the month-old Sports Illustrated for the last hour. Josiah was sitting on the window sill, gazing at the late summer sunset. Nathan was slumped in one of the overstuffed chairs while Vin was sprawled out on the couch, looking ceiling. Buck sat at the table stirring an already cold cup of coffee.

Chris stared deadly daggers on the door, willing for it to open and the doctor to say that Ezra was alright. But with each passing minute, Chris feared the worse. 'What's takin' so damn long?!!' he thought to himself. "I'm gonna check what's happenin'," he said gruffly and was about to hit the doors when they swung open and the doctor walked through. Everyone straighten up and descended on him like tigers during feeding time.

Doctor Mark Evans was a veteran doctor at University Hospital, and ran his area with an iron fist. He was used to the comings and goings of Team Seven and had dealt with the men many times before. He was aware of the close bond between the seven men and didn't dare to dance around the situation for fear of their wrath.

"Gentlemen."

"How is he Doc?" Buck asked worriedly.

"Your friend is lucky to be alive." He held up his fingers and



demonstrated just how close they were to losing him. "Two more inches to the right and he would have been a dead man. The bullet just missed his aorta valve, but it managed to nick his lung in the process. It also caused a considerable amount of muscle damage. He's lost a lot of blood, and it will take a considerable amount of time for him to regain his strength. We're moving him into the ICU now."

"When can we see him?" Chris asked in a less than steady voice.

"Give us fifteen minutes, then I'll send someone to get you fellas. I can't let you stay too long though. Mr. Standish needs his rest."

"Thank you Doctor Evans," Josiah called out as the doctor left the room.

"My pleasure gentlemen. Just make sure Mr. Standish doesn't hijack any more medical scrubs," Doctor Evans said with a faint smile and walked out the door. His statement brought a chorus of groans as the men were reminded of the time Ezra managed to hightail out of the hospital by dressing as an orderly. It was going to be a long night.

As Chris walked down the hall of the ICU, he began to breathe in and out slowly. The others had urged him to go first, seeing the torture behind his eyes. The night shift nurses greeted him; they too were familiar with the seven men. 'Damn, we have spent way too much time in here because the nurses know us personally,' Chris thought.

He stopped in front of room eight and peered through the glass partition that separated Ezra from the outside world. A curtain had been pulled around the bed and was now pushed open by one of the nurses taking vitals. She nodded at Chris before she left and headed off to complete the paperwork.

Seeing Ezra looking so haggard made his anger build to new heights. The constant beep of the machine that monitored Ezra's heart kept chewing away at his resolve to keep calm. 'I promise you Ezra, I'll get the son of a bitch who did this to you. You have my word.'

Pulling the plush green chair that sat in the corner of the hospital room closer to the bed,

Chris settled in and waited for Ezra to wake up.

An hour had passed since Chris gone to Ezra's room, so the others went to see how both Ezra and Chris were doing. One of the new nurses was vehemently arguing with JD and Buck that she could not let so many men in at one time. While they were arguing, Vin slipped past the watchful nurse and headed toward Ezra's room. He could see Chris sitting on the chair, leaning forward with his hands clasped tightly in front of him.

Vin leaned against the door post, silently watching the two men. Chris had a look of determination and Vin knew what it meant. Chris just wanted to rip the bastard responsible for Ezra's pain. Vin felt the same way.

Ezra, on the other hand, was as pale as the white pillow he rested on. His features melted into it, his eyes closed unaware of the world around him.

"Hey pard," the sharpshooter greeted quietly as he walked inside the room. Chris glanced at him, but quickly returned his attention to Ezra.

Vin walked close to the bed and absentmindedly clasped his hand within Ezra's and gently squeezed it, assuring the undercover agent that one of his friends was near. He did not expect for the hand to squeeze back. He leaned in closer, and said, "Ez, ya hear me?"

Chris bounded up from his chair and stood beside the bed. He could see Ezra's eyes move back and forth behind closed eyelids. The agent was slowly beginning to wake up.

All Ezra felt was the painful sensation every time he took a breath. 'What the hell?' he thought to himself as he glanced at his surroundings. 'Why I am I in the water?' From somewhere

above the watery grave, he could hear voices calling him, urging him to open his eyes. The voices sounded so familiar to him, but so distant through the lake.

"Come on Ezra, open your eyes," Chris urged his friend. 'Please reassure me that you will be all right,' he thought to himself. He saw a hint of movement from Ezra's right hand and grasped it. "Come on Ezra!"

Ezra felt like he was bobbing below the surface of a lake. No matter what he tried, he vainly could not get his legs to move him to the surface. Suddenly from above, a hand pierced the watery prison and motioned for him to grab hold of it. Another hand broke the surface and grabbed his other. Together, they hauled Ezra from the watery depths that held him captive.

Ezra Standish took a deep breath and dared to slowly open his eyes. He groaned at the sight of two smiling men standing over him. "No need to be so vocal Mr. Larabee," a scratchy voice said. "I have not lost my hearing." Ezra took in his surroundings and groaned a second time when he realized where he was. "Not again," he moaned.

Vin chuckled. "Yeah, \*again\* Ez. You know it's a good idea to step \*away\* from the bullets when they go a flyin'," Vin said, grinning lopsidedly.

Ezra looked at him wearily, his eyes heavy from the drugs that were being pumped into his system. "Remind me to laugh later Mr. Tanner," he said.

"You remember anythin' Ez?" Chris asked. 'Like the son of bitch that shot you,' he thought.

The undercover agent furrowed his brow in concentration trying to remember the events of the day. He recalled driving to the warehouse and waiting inside. Ezra looked at Chris and a face flashed briefly over in this mind, but as much as he tried, the image fluttered away.

"No. . ." Ezra said disappointedly. He tried to stay awake, but as the minutes ticked away the less he was able to fight it.

Chris noticed that Ezra was about to doze off. "Get some rest Ezra. We'll worry about the rest later."

The two men watched as Ezra barely nod his head before he dozed off. Vin looked at his friend. "What now?"

I don't know," Chris replied as he rubbed his face, "I just don't know."

A couple of minutes passed by in companionable silence before Chris noticed the others standing in the doorway. He mentioned for them to come in.

"The nurse finally had enough of ya uh?" Vin drawled.

"Yep," Buck replied smiling. When he saw Ezra lying on the bed, his smile immediately vanished. "How is he?"

"He woke up for a moment, so it looks like he'll be fine," Vin replied. "He doesn't remember anythin' though."

During the entire conversation between Buck and Vin, Chris kept his mouth shut. He knew if he opened it, even just a crack, he'd get into one of his tirades. He waited a few more minutes to get his anger in check before he turned to his team.

"Josiah, Nate, I want you guys to get on that computer of yours and dig up whatever the police have on the scene. JD, go and listen to the tapes and see if you can find anything that would indicate that Ezra knew the individual. Buck, go with him. Vin. . ."

"I'll handle the paperwork," he said, reading his boss' thought. "What about you?"

"I'm stayin' right here," Chris replied.

Vin knew on some level, Chris took partial blame for what happened. Every time one of the team got hurt, Chris took in personally. The sharpshooter wondered if he would ever quit taking the blame. "You need to rest Chris."

Chris looked deeply in the sharpshooter's eyes, then glanced back at Ezra who was sleeping now. Chris caught the quick grimace that appeared on the southerner's face as Ezra breathed deeply. "Maybe later," he said. 'When all of this is over.'

It was close to midnight as Jack Travers walked down the moonlit streets of Denver. He had spent the last few hours sitting in an alley, thinking about what he had done. Finally unable to bear the onslaught of emotions, he tried to find solace by taking a stroll.

He found himself standing across the street from University Hospital. He watched as an ambulance barreled past him. The back doors of the emergency vehicle were thrown opened, making a clanking sound as they hit the sides of the vehicle. Jack looked on sadly, realizing that it

would never be the same between him, and Chris and Buck. Not after what he had done to one of Chris' men.

There was a fierce loyalty between Chris and his coworkers; it was evident by the cohesiveness the team showed at the warehouse. He could have tried to explain it to Chris and the others, but they just would not be able to understand what he endured over the past year. In his heart, Jack knew his friendship with Chris was over.

The cool breeze did nothing to soften the pain in his heart. Jack rubbed his right arm, trying to get rid of some of the numbness he felt there. 'All because of this damn disease,' he mumbled to himself. Slowly, he turned away from the building and disappeared into the night.

Usually at midnight, the Denver ATF offices were empty. But on the seventh floor of the ATF building, four men were busily working, either on the computer or listening to the tapes of the day's bust.

"Uh. Look at this Nathan," Josiah said as he reviewed the police report on the computer. As the ex-medic stood over his shoulder, Josiah pointed to a spot on the screen. "It says here that they found a bottle of Baclofen in the glove compartment. Do you know what that stuff is?"

"Yeah," Nathan replied, somewhat surprised. "People take it to control muscle spasticity." When met by a blank stare, he explained further. "Muscle spasticity is when your muscles start to get stiff and rigid involuntary. Basically, a person doesn't have any control over their motor

functions. Is there a name to go along with the prescription?"

"Let's see. . ." Josiah said as he scrolled the menu down. "Yep, his name is Jack Travers." He went to the police database and entered the name on a search engine. Travers' service record came up almost immediately. "It says here that he's an FBI agent from the San Francisco area." He scrolled further down. "And he's a highly decorated officer. He received a number awards for service to the community."

"I wonder what happened," Nathan said as he gazed at the screen. "His record is near perfect."

"Wait, here's somethin'. It says he's temporary off duty."

"Does it say why?" Nathan asked.

Josiah shook his head and hit the print key. He knew that his leader would want to see the information they had already gathered. "Maybe JD can do a little hackin' for us," Josiah suggested. Nathan helped him gather the papers and put them in a manila folder. Satisfied they had gotten everything they needed, they left for the audio room at the other end of the floor to go and see what JD and Buck had found.

In the audio room on the seventh floor, JD was listening carefully to the tapes from the afternoon bust. Buck stepped out of the way and

sat on the window sill, letting the young agent work. The usually fun-loving agent was in a somber mood. He hadn't seen

Chris so stricken with grief in years. 'It was like he lost something,' Buck thought to himself.

Buck glanced at a calendar on the wall and jumped up from his sitting place. "The date. Oh my God, it happened today!" Buck said out loud. He kept clenching and unclenching his fists, angry at himself for forgetting. He had been so busy lately. 'No, that's no excuse.'

"What happened today? Are you talking about Ezra?" JD asked surprised. He paused the tape and took off his headphones. JD leaned back in his chair, his hands clasped behind his head. Buck had been so quiet the past hour that JD was growing concerned.

"Nothin'," Buck replied and sat back down, staring at the floor.

"Buck, I may be young, but I'm not stupid," JD said dryly. "What's wrong?"

Buck looked deeply into his friend's hazel eyes. 'So young and innocent. Why did you pick this line of work Kid?' The older agent looked out the window. "Today is the anniversary of Sarah and Adam's death."

JD took a deep breath. Suddenly, he understood why Chris had been so overly consumed with Ezra's condition. 'True, Chris cares for each of us in the same way, but I guess what happened to Ezra today brought more painful memories,' JD thought to himself. He started the tape up again and placed the headphones back on his head, leaving Buck alone with his thoughts.

Josiah and Nathan walked through the open door and were met by a wall of silence.

They glanced at each other and Nathan shrugged his shoulders. "Found something," Josiah announced.

Buck leaped off the window sill. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Yup, the Holy Grail," Josiah said. "Here, have a look."

Buck took the folder from Josiah's hands. He needed to think about something else besides Sarah and Adam at the moment. The folder was thick with information; Josiah and Nathan had done well. He flipped the folder open and met with another tail spinning revelation. Jack Travers' face was plastered all over the police reports.

"Is this some kind of joke?!" he yelled and slammed the folder on the table. Josiah and Nathan looked at him with shock.

"What are you talkin' about Buck?" Nathan asked.

Buck pointed accusingly at the folder on the desk. "The man in there would \*not\* have done such a thing! Hell, I had lunch with him today!"

"What?!"

"You mean that guy that visited your office this morning? The one that you and Chris

went to lunch with?" JD asked incredulously.

"Hell yeah! He can't be involved. Uh, uh, no way," Buck replied and expressed his firm point by waving his arms in front of him. A part of his mind screamed that Jack Travers, a man that he had known since his rookie year, could never have done something so terrible as shoot a fellow lawman. But a small part of his mind began to wonder. 'It been a long time. A lot can happen in seven years. But why? Why did he do it?'

"Buck." Josiah laid a comforting hand on his shoulder. "We doubled checked. The information is correct. The car was a rental, under the name of Jack Travers. The medicine bottle they found had the name Jack Travers on it. The prints belong to Jack Travers."

"Oh God," Buck moaned and slid in a nearby chair. He nervously picked up the manila folder and forced himself to look at the contents. As he turned each page, the ache in his heart grew stronger. "What's Baclofen?" he asked shakily as he took note of the contents of the prescription bottle.

The sympathy in the other men's eyes was heartbreaking. None of them had ever seen the fun-loving man so distraught.

"Baclofen is used to treat muscle spasticity which causes stiff muscles that can interfere with muscular activity, gait, movement, or speech." Nathan replied. "It can be caused by stroke, cerebral palsy. . ."

"Stop! I don't want to be here anymore!" Buck yelled as he stood up so suddenly that the chair tipped over. He went to stand by the window. Buck could feel the eyes of Josiah, Nathan, and JD burning a hole in his back. He grasped the window sill so tight his knuckles turned white.

"My God, what is Chris going to think?" he whispered in the silent room.

The day dawned bright and beautiful. Chris Larabee stood outside his home, watching as his wife and son leaving to go to school. Just before Sarah pulled out of the driveway, she glanced back at Chris standing on the porch and waved goodbye. Chris smiled and was momentarily distracted as a fly that decided his head was a very interesting perch. When he looked back at the truck, Jack Traver's sickly looking face stared back at him. A face that looked like father time had withered his handsome face into an ugly shell of a man; his eyes were gaunt and lifeless, his skin pale and a sallow gray color.

A blinding bright light caused Larabee to cover his eyes and when he looked back, the truck was amassed in flames. . .

Chris Larabee awoke with a start. He panicked for a moment at the unfamiliar surroundings. It was the beeping sound of the heart monitor that reminded Chris that he was in Ezra's room. He stretched

tired muscles and glanced at the clock on the wall. Midnight. He had barely slept two hours.

The hospital room was dark; the moon casting about a small portion of the room. Rays of moonlight fell on the undercover agent's face, highlighting one of the bruises Ezra sustained from the shootout that afternoon.

Chris raked a hand through his unruly hair, trying to get some sense of control. The dream bothered him. He didn't know why Jack Travers would be haunting his sleep. It was as if the dream was a warning of some kind.

The black-clad gunslinger noticed a slight figure sleeping in another chair. 'Vin,' Chris thought as he stood up and walked toward the window. His haggard appearance was evident in the reflection. He crossed his arms around his chest, leaned his forehead against the cool glass, and closed his eyes. He was tired. The stress of Ezra's condition kept chewing away at the little resolve he had left. He wanted nothing more than to hang the man who was responsible upside down and shake him for all that he was worth.

Chris opened his green eyes and stared down at the street. That was when he noticed a well-dressed man standing on the far side of the street. The face looked familiar to him, but whoever the person was, he was standing just out of reach of the streetlight. Chris strained to catch a glimpse of the dark figure, but with so little light, he could barely make out his features. As the figure walked away from the hospital, the streetlight fell across the stranger's face.

'Jack? Now why would he be here?' Chris thought to himself as a nagging sense of doubt rumbled deep in his mind.

"My God, what is Chris going to think?" he whispered in the silent room.

The only sound that greeted Buck's question was the ticking of the clock above the door. Buck gazed at the full moon, his turbulent thoughts his only companion.

A pair of footsteps clicked on the linoleum floor and stopped right behind him.

"I don't get it. Why would he do such a thing?" Buck whispered.

When Josiah first discovered that Jack Travers was their man, he was consumed with hatred for the man responsible for shooting Ezra. But now, he wasn't sure. What hurt Buck, hurt all of them. Most of all, Chris would feel guilty about letting his team down. 'If this Travers guy is such a good friend, the road ahead is going to be a tough one. Chris will think that he could have prevented Ezra from getting hurt, Buck is going to feel like he failed Chris. . . oh hell it's going to be a big mess,' Josiah thought.

"How about we go get some answers Buck?" Josiah asked.

"Yeah," Buck replied dejectedly. "Let's go get some," he said, turning away from the window. The others were amazed at how fast Buck had aged. Dark circles formed underneath his eyes and he had lost some of his energetic personality. One thing that the team could

count on was Buck's exuberance, but tonight there was none.

Josiah wasn't so sure if it would ever show again.

"What are you thinkin' about, pard?" a soft Texan voice drawled.

Chris turned away from the window and met the penetrating aqua blue eyes of Vin Tanner. A half smile escaped Chris' lips.

"Nothin' much," he replied.

Vin knew Chris was lyin' to him. He could see beyond those green eyes that Chris' mind was racing. The sharpshooter could literally feel the guilt emanating off of Chris' lean form. Vin rubbed his weary eyes. It was like déjà vu all over again. He had lost track of the number of times that one of them were injured and Chris had felt guilty that he was to blame.

Vin stretched his cramped muscles and got up from the chair. He always hated those bright plastic things hospitals thought were so comfortable. They were never comfortable enough to sit in, let alone sleep in. He checked the time and silently wondered if the others were going to get back soon.

Ezra was sleeping rather peacefully. 'Of course it usually takes an army to wake him up,' Vin mused. "I'm goin' to get somethin' to drink. Want anythin'?"

"No," was the short reply.

Vin gave his leader the familiar two-fingered salute and went in search of a soda machine.

Even though JD's arm was broken, it did not effect his typing skills as his fingers flew across the keyboard. The Kid had been hacking at the FBI database searching for Jack Travers' personnel file. Josiah and Nathan were hovering over his personal space while Buck decided to make pacing a new art form.

"Geez, the FBI needs tighter security on their computers," JD mumbled as he easily bypassed the last firewall before entering the FBI personnel files. He typed a couple more commands and brought up the necessary file.

"Here it is!" he shouted loudly, though it was totally unnecessary.

"Easy there JD, we're right next to you," Nathan said as he rubbed his ears.

"Sorry," JD said sheepishly. He turned to see Buck stop pacing. Buck smiled at his roommate's computer expertise. It never ceased to amaze him what the kid could do with an internet connection and a computer. Walking over to JD, Buck looked over the young agent's shoulder to see what he had found.

Ummm . . ." Josiah thought, "it looks like his wife left him a year and a half ago. She has full custody of their daughter and he has no visitation rights."



"But why would he suddenly get into the business of selling information?" JD inquired.

"Oh man, look how much he's payin' in alimony." Josiah announced.

Both JD and Nathan's eyes bulged out at the amount. "Damn, what's he supportin'? A small country?" Nathan asked in disbelief.

"Good Lord," Buck whispered. He had been paying only semi attention to the other agent's conversation. He had been looking further down the report when he saw it. "He's got. . . he's got. . ."

Nathan quickly looked at where Buck was pointing. "Good Lord. . ."  
Nathan said, using Ezra's favorite expression.

The room grew quiet as the four men took in the new information. "JD," Josiah ordered, "get this stuff printed out. We're headin' back to the hospital."

'Chris is going to flip, Chris is going to flip, Chris is going to flip,' Buck chanted in his mind as the four of them made their way back to University Hospital. He watched as the scenery flew by. Few people ventured out into the streets of Denver late at night and Buck found some solace in the empty streets. It was a far cry from the jumbled thoughts that ransacked his brain.

He barely noticed as the Nathan parked his Explorer in a nearby space. Buck numbly got out of the car and headed for the hospital entrance. Buck tried to release the nervous energy he was feeling and began to crack his knuckles during the elevator ride. No one had enough heart to tell him to stop.

The elevator paused on the third floor and the four member's of Team 7 filed out. JD slammed into Buck, who hadn't moved an inch since getting off the elevator. "Buck?" JD asked.

Buck wasn't listening to his young friend. He gazed down the hallway; never before had a walk to a hospital room seem like a death sentence.

"Come on Buck," Josiah urged his troubled friend. "We have to tell him sometime."

"I know," Buck answered quietly. "I'm just dreadin' his reaction."

After Vin had left, Chris settled back into the chair. He had a queasy feeling in his stomach again. He got up from his chair and checked on Ezra. The undercover agent was sleeping peacefully and Chris brushed a tendril of hair away from his face. 'I'm so sorry Ezra. I'm sorry I let this happen to you.'

A shadow fell over Ezra's face and Chris turned to the door to see who it was. Four of his agents stood before him, each one with a guarded look on his face. Buck, in particular, looked like he had aged a couple of years. The black clad leader of the Seven could see the turmoil behind the normally gregarious agent. 'This can't be good,' Chris thought.

"What is it?" Chris asked.

"Sit down Chris," Josiah said and guided his friend to a nearby chair.

'Okay, now I really know this can't be good,' Chris thought to himself. His four agents took up a variety of positions around the room. Josiah and Nathan stood by Ezra's bed; JD leaned against the window sill; and Buck sat next to Chris.

In his hand, Buck clutched the manila folder. He looked deep into the eyes of his oldest friend. "We found out who shot Ezra," he stated simply.

Vin walked in the room carrying a root beer and stopped in his tracks. The sharpshooter could feel tension that hung in the air. "What the . . ."

But Buck shushed him with a wave of his hand and handed Chris the folder. Chris took it without tearing his gaze from his oldest friend. In all the years he had known Buck, Chris had only seen that look once in Buck's eyes and that was when he found out that Sarah and Adam had been killed in the car bombing.

Chris carefully opened the thick folder. The picture was the first thing he noticed and he dropped the folder like it was a hot potato. He glanced fearfully at Buck and the fun-loving man could do nothing but nod yes.

"It. . .it can't be true. . ." Chris began to say, backing away from the offending item that lay on the floor.

Vin picked up the folder and read the contents. "Jack Travers? He's the guy?"

"Chris and I knew him back when we were rookies in San Antonio," Buck said sadly.

"It ain't true. . ." Chris stated more forcefully.

Vin sighed out loud. He knew this day was going to get worse.

"It's not true. . ." Chris said again. He felt a hand gently squeeze his shoulder and shrugged it off, not wanting to feel the comforting touch. His mind was reeling from the notion that Travers shot one of his agents. "I know him too well. . . and so do you!" he yelled at Buck.

"A lot can happened in seven years Chris," Josiah stated softly. Chris glared at the him.

"Chris, there is somethin' else," Buck said as he stood up to face him. "Jack's got. . ." Buck paused for a moment, wishing there was an easier way to say it. "He's got Lou Gehrig's disease."

Chris' eyes widen in surprise and he would have collapsed on the floor if in weren't for JD sliding a chair underneath his wobbly legs.

"That's why he's been selling information. He couldn't keep up with the medical bills and. . . and alimony payments toward his ex-wife," Buck explained quietly.

"No. . ." Chris said, still adamantly denying the truth. "It's all a joke. Some sick joke!" he yelled and buried his hands in his face.

"Chris," Josiah began and moved from his place by Ezra's bed to comfort his grieving friend.

"No!" Chris shouted. "Leave me alone! Just. . ." He stopped mid-sentence as Chris' eyes rested on Ezra's sleeping form. Knowing that someone he trusted, a person whom he owed his life to, would shoot a fellow agent. Chris couldn't take the pain of the memory seeing Ezra sprawled out on the cement floor, all because Jack Travers, a friend, shot him.

Suddenly, everything fell into place for Chris. Travers standing across the street earlier with a forlorn look on his face. The weary, tired look in Jack's eyes during lunch. The dream he had while keeping a silent vigil over Ezra. They were all signs that there was something wrong in his friend and he didn't notice the changes. Not noticing what was wrong with Jack, it almost

cost Ezra's life.

"Just leave me alone," Chris whispered and left the room, not wanting to face the other five men.

Buck collapsed in the chair that Chris had vacated. "That went well."

"I'll talk to him," the sharpshooter replied and left the folder along with and his root beer on the table before heading out to locate his grief stricken friend. The others watched in silence as he left.

They turned their attention to Ezra when a soft groan escaped the sleeping agents' lips. JD moved next to the bed. "Ezra?"

"Oh. . ." the undercover agent moaned as he tried to open his eyes. A mess of black hair was all he could make out. Ezra blinked his eyes several times to try to clear his vision and he saw JD staring down at him. "Wha. . . what happened?"

"You don't remember?" Nathan asked as he stood across from JD.

"I. . ." suddenly it hit him like a ton of bricks. "Omigod, Chris! Travers! He. . ."

"He's your contact in the warehouse," Nathan finished for him. Ezra looked at him confused. "We just found out less than an hour ago."

"How's he takin' it?" Ezra questioned. Nathan marveled how the undercover agent had changed. A year ago, Ezra wouldn't have bothered to ask. But Nathan learned that Ezra cared deeply about them and would even sacrifice himself.

"Not good. Vin is talkin' to him," Nathan said.

Ezra glanced around the all too familiar room. "Not the hospital. .  
." he moaned.

"What do ya expect?" Nathan replied grinning widely.

"I'm beginning to hate this place," Ezra stated as he tried to get up.

"Just what do you think your doin'?" Nathan scolded as he forced his southern friend to lay back down with a firm grip on his arm.

"I thought I'd take a stroll over to the elevator, take it to the ground floor and hail a cab to go home?" Ezra said hopefully.

"Yeah, and trip over your feet and tearing open that wound which will make your stay here longer," Nathan said wryly. "Lay back down."

Ezra tried his best puppy dog look, but Nathan only stared back at him. "Now," he said firmly.

"Aw hooey!!" Ezra replied as he laid back down. JD and Nathan exchanged amused smiles as Ezra tried to get comfortable.

Buck watched as Ezra settled in. "I'm sorry about this Ezra."

"Don't bother Mr. Wilmington. There are more important things to consider than my health," Ezra drawled as he locked eyes with Buck. "Namely a certain leader who is probably tearing himself apart."

Buck held his head in his hands. He felt somewhat responsible for Ezra's condition since now he knew that Travers had caused it. Buck had never felt so lost as he did right then. He wanted to go out there and talk to Chris but Buck didn't even now where to begin.

Chris stood out on the hospital balcony, leaning against a metal railing. His face was unreadable as he gazed out at the sky. Chris turned his head slightly as he heard footsteps echoing on the tile floor. Vin walked up beside his friend and allowed several moments of comfortable silence to pass between them.

"What changes a man, Vin?" Chris finally asked.

Vin stood quietly beside him, looking out at the Denver skyline. "Somethin' that alters the way you live, good or bad." Vin stared at the street below. "Before my ma died, she told my 'Remember son, you're a Tanner.' Those five words changed my life."

"For the better," Chris mumbled. "But Jack. . . never in million years did I ever think that Jack Travers would shoot a fella agent. I don't know what to think anymore."

"We'll be here for you pard," Vin said as he clapped his best friend on the shoulder. "When ya figure it out."

Chris offered him a half-smile. Buck was there for him after Sarah and Adam died. It was a big task, but Buck was unwilling to give up. Now, he had five additional helpers. 'Damn Jack, why did you trust me enough to tell me earlier before this entire thing happened?'

His life was over, that much he knew. Chris and Buck would never trust him again. His time was so short as it was because of his damn disease. 'There was only one option left to me,' Travers thought to himself as he worked on the small device in front him.

Sunlight kissed the morning sky on a beautiful Wednesday morning. Two days had passed and Team Seven wasn't having any luck in tracking Jack Travers. The six men alternated between the hospital and the office, but Chris was spending more time in Ezra's room than in the ATF Building. He felt so guilty about the incident he refused to leave Ezra's side for even a

moment.

Nathan finally convinced Chris to take a break and to go home and get some sleep. The ex-medic spent part of his Wednesday morning arguing with the undercover agent about the importance of well balanced breakfast.

"Coffee is not one of the major food groups," Nathan argued.

"I assure you Mr. Jackson, it is," Ezra drawled. "Coffee comes from a bean and a bean is a type of vegetable. Therefore, coffee is one of the major food groups." His smile was so wide, his gold tooth was showing.

Nathan threw up his hands in frustration at the logic of his friend. 'Damn, he irritates me to no end,' Nathan thought. "Ezra, you don't eat those eggs and I'm gonna tell the doc you need to stay in here for another week instead of three days," he said with a perfectly devilish smile on his handsome features.

Ezra narrowed his eyes. "You wouldn't dare."

Nathan's smile got wider as he stayed silent.

"Mind you Mr. Jackson, I will get you back for this," Ezra said as he picked up a fork and dug into the soggy eggs.

Nathan laughed heartily at the expression of his friend. He had no doubt in his mind that Ezra would get back at him for this incident.

"I'm glad to see you in such good spirits Ez," Chris said from behind Nathan.

"Didn't I tell you to go home and sleep?" Nathan reprimanded his friend. Chris looked terrible. There were dark circles under his green eyes, his hair was mussed up, and his black clothes were wrinkled.

"Couldn't," Chris replied simply and gestured the black man outside. They walked over to the nurses station which was currently unoccupied. "Somethin' has bein' bothering me."

"Which is?" Nathan prodded.

"What's Lou Gerhrig's disease?" Chris asked and leaned on the raised countertop. "What is it really? I've heard small stuff about it over the years, but I don't know that much about it."

"Are you sure you want to hear all of it?" Nathan asked. He knew how much his friend was hurting and Nathan didn't feel like adding more burden to the pain.

"All of it," Chris said firmly.

"Come on Chris." Nathan grabbed his arm and led him to the waiting room. "I'd rather tell you privately."

They settled in one of couches and Nathan rubbed his face tiredly, not knowing where to begin. "Lou Gerhig's disease is another name for Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis or ALS. It's a disorder that involves the loss of use and control of a person's muscles."

"How?" Chris asked.

"The nerves in the spinal cord and brain shrink and disappear," Nathan replied softly. "Doctors think it is hereditary."

Chris stood up shakily, his hand absently rubbing at the stubble that covered his chin. Slowly, he made his way to the hospital windows and looked out at the Denver skyline. "Symptoms?"

"Muscle weakness, cramps, speech impairment, difficulty breathing. . ." Nathan said, his voice trailed off as he watched his friend visibly shake. "But it doesn't effect thinking or reasoning."

Chris turned to Nathan, a single tear trailing down his cheek. It pained him to think that Travers was going through all of that alone. 'To still have a sharp mind and be trapped by with the confines of your body,' Chris thought to himself. "It's fatal, isn't it?"

Nathan nodded sadly. "Less than twenty percent survive past five years."

"God damn it," Chris swore.

Someone cleared their throat as Nathan and Chris turned to see Buck standing in the doorway with a manila folder in his hand. "Nathan, Chris," Buck said as he nodded at the two men. He had caught the tail end of the conversation and the two men couldn't help but notice Buck's tear-filled eyes. "JD was able to dig up some additional information on Jack Travers."

Chris reached for the folder with some trepidation. The last time he touched one, it shattered him. He flipped open the folder and read its contents. "Damn. . . the Bureau didn't cover for these charges?"

"They did pard," Buck replied. "But the medical care was too high. It wasn't enough to cover the bill. And add the fact how much he is payin' his ex-wife, Jack must have felt selling information was the only way to survive."

"He didn't have to do this. . ." Chris said frustrated and he ran a hand through his unruly hair. "There are other ways. . ."

"Maybe he felt it was the only way," Buck began, trying to come up with a plausible reason for Travers' actions.

"No! I can't accept that! There are always options; he didn't have to be so drastic."

"To us it's drastic. But to him, it's different," Nathan said. "He's the one living with this disease Chris. Can you imagine not using your arms? You couldn't drive. Or how about not having the ability to use your legs? You couldn't ride a bike. Baclofen can help slow the symptoms down, but that stuff ain't cheap."

"Chris," Buck said and laid his hand on his shoulder. "This hurts me as much as it hurts you. But we have to face it. Jack Travers was selling information to pay for medicine he needs to survive. Medicine that will help him in the short term but not for the long term. You can't blame yourself for this because there is nothing and I mean \*nothing\* we could do about it."

Chris knew there was a ring of truth in Buck's words, but he just had a hard time accepting it. "God I hate this! I'm getting too old for this sort of stuff. . ." Chris said tiredly.

Buck engulfed his suffering friend in a hug. He knew that his oldest friend needed the comfort as much as he did. "I know pard, I know," Buck said quietly. "So am I."

With the plastic fork, Ezra poked at the strange concoction on his plate. It looked like fruit salad but he wasn't too sure. He gingerly tasted it and made a face. "Belch. That's the last time I venture in this horrendous food," and pushed the remnants of his breakfast away.

"How about some contraband then?" a Texan voice drawled.

"Well Mr. Tanner," Ezra drawled as he pointed at the half eaten plate, "anything would be better than what this hospital defines as food."

Vin placed the bag on the tray table and got out a bagel, cream cheese, and some smoked salmon. "I know how much you like that bakery over on Cornell Street."

"You are a God send Mr. Tanner," Ezra said, smiling widely at his friend. He eagerly spread the cream cheese on the pre-sliced bagel, added some of thinly cut salmon, and took a huge bite. "Much more delectable than that sorry excuse for breakfast over there."

"What are you doin'?" Nathan said as he walked through the door.

"Eatin'," Ezra said nonchalantly and went back to his breakfast.

"Have you seen Chris?" Vin asked trying to avoid a confrontation between Ezra and Nathan.

"Yeah, Buck is taking him outside for some fresh air," Nathan said as he sunk into a nearby chair. The past few days had been taking a toll on all of them and if felt good to sit back and relax for a little bit.

JD was busily working at his desk when his phone rang. "Agent Dunne speaking," he said as he cradled the phone on his shoulder. "Huh, uh," and jotted some notes down, " oh damn. . . right I'll contact him immediately. Thanks."

"Got somethin'?" Josiah asked as he looked up from his paperwork.

"Yeah, they found him," JD said as he quickly dialed Chris' cell phone number. "Shoot, his phone is off." JD hung up and dialed Vin's cell number.

The quiet solitude was interrupted by the ring of a cell phone and Vin removed his from his pocket. "Tanner," Vin said.

"Vin, it's me JD," the young agent said. "They found him. He's in his car on the corner of Lockwood and Denton."

"Alright, Chris, Nate and Buck are here. We'll head over there right away," he said as he hung up, cutting off JD in mid-sentence.

"Vin! Wait! He. . ." JD said quickly but was met with the dial tone. "Damn it," he mumbled and tried Vin's number again, but was met with his voice mail. "Damn it!" JD went to get his coat and Josiah followed him, worried about the fearful look in JD's eyes.

"JD, what's happening?" Josiah said desperately as he grabbed his coat and followed the younger agent to the elevator.

JD pressed the down button and turned to Josiah. "Vin hung up before I could tell him that Travers has a bomb in his car and is threatening to blow himself up."

"Damn," Josiah muttered under his breath and pressed the down button again.

"They found him," Vin explained as he got up from his chair. "You coming Nate?"

"I'll stay here," Nathan said.

"Mr. Jackson, I do not need. . ." Ezra began.

"Hush Ezra," Nathan ordered. "Do you really want me to tell the guys what really happened a couple of months ago?"

Ezra turned immediately to Vin. "Mr. Tanner, times a wasting. Good luck on your endeavor."

"Oookay," Vin said as he stared at both of them strangely. It was a rarity that Ezra would back down from a verbal sparring. "I'll see you two in a bit," and he headed out the door.

Vin found Buck and Chris outside, on the balcony. "Chris?" he said tentatively. "They've located him."



Chris turned to the quiet sharpshooter. It was time to face the demons within him. A demon in the form of Jack Travers. How could he fail so miserably in protecting a friend? Maybe he could collect some of the broken pieces of their friendship. Chris was determined to help his ailing friend in any way he could with friendship and support. "Where's he at?"

"Down in the shopping district, corner of Lockwood and Denton," Vin replied.

"Well then, let's get goin'," Chris said and headed for his Dodge, determined not to let Jack Travers slip into pain and misery alone.

Police cars were swarming around the area as Chris Larabee pulled his Dodge up to the scene, Vin's battered Jeep following close behind. Chris and Buck immediately jumped out of the Dodge and headed for the police barrier. The three men showed their ID badges to the officer and were escorted to the base of operations which was the back case the back of a Squat van.

"Brendan," Chris stated smoothly.

"Chris, Buck," Lieutenant Brendan Knoll greeted the two men. He saw Vin lagging behind them. "Vin." He was good friends with the members of Team Seven; they had helped him in a number of occasions when their expertise were needed, such as this one.

"What's the situation?" Vin asked him.

Brendan indicated the Dodge Neon that was parked on the side of the street. "At eight this morning, Jack Travers parked his car at the stoplight. When he wouldn't move after the light turned green, one of the motorists got out his car and approached Travers. He informed the motorist about the car bomb which happened to be sitting right next to him. The motorist called us immediately."

Chris narrowed his eyes. "Bomb?"

Brendan widen his eyes in surprise. "Yeah Chris I thought you knew. I told JD about it over the phone."

"Damn, I must've hung up on him before he told me," Vin replied, cursing at himself for not getting the entire story.

Chris rubbed his temples in frustration. 'It's too early in the morning to be dealing with this. And I'm not ready to deal with Jack yet,' he thought. "When will the bomb squad get here?"

"In about ten minutes," Brendan answered.

"Lieutenant!" an officer yelled from inside the van. He had a set of headphones over his ear and a recording device in front of him.

"Yes officer?" Brendan asked.

"He's on the phone, wanting to talk to a Chris Larabee," the officer stated.

Chris glanced at Buck. It was either now or never. "Hand me a headset." When they gave it to him, Chris quickly put it on. "Jack? It's me Chris."

As they waited for a response, Buck turned to Brendan. "Do you know what's the trigger for the bomb?" he said in a low voice.

"From what we can tell, a simple remote. If he just presses the key. . ."

Buck stared at the place that Travers made his final stand. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

Finally, a meek voice came over the line. "Chris?"

Chris took a deep breath and continued. He noticed that Buck had gotten a head piece for himself and listened to the conversation.

"I'm so sorry Chris," Jack said over the phone, his voice trembling. "I never wanted this."

"I know you didn't Jack. How about you come out and we can talk about it, face to face?"

"I can't. . . I can't do it. . ."

"Yes you can." Chris took another breath to get his bearing. What could he say to convince the man to stand down? Negotiation was definitely not his strong point; he wasn't as skilled as Ezra in manipulating words. Suddenly it clicked in his mind what to say. "What about your daughter? Are you going to let her go through life without a father?"

Jack let out a horrendously vicious laugh. "Life?! Come on Chris, by now you know what I have!" It grew quiet for a moment. "The doctors say I don't have much time. What kind of life can I give my daughter when all she sees is a person that loves her wasting away. Might as well end the pain and misery now."

::click::

"Damn!" Chris cursed and threw the headset on the ground, smashing it into several pieces. He couldn't let his friend die for nothing. There was too much to talk about, so many words left unspoken between them. "Vin, I want you to get to a good spot. See if you can disarm him. I'm gonna be over there and talk to him."

"Are you insane?!" Buck yelled, staring wide-eyed at his oldest friend.

When Chris turned to look at him with a determined gleam in his eye, Buck strained to clench his jaw from mouthing off something he would regret later. "Never mind, don't answer that," turning his head away from him. He looked at the Neon, parked a scant seventy-five yards away, and sighed deeply. "Let me go with you."

"Buck. . ."

"He's my friend too," the fun loving agent stated simply.

"Pard, I don't think that's the best idea," Vin drawled as he grabbed his Chris' arm.

Chris looked coolly at Vin's hand and then his face. "I'll entertain another suggestion."

Silence met with his request. Vin struggled to come up with another plan, any plan would be better than his best friend standing near the Neon.

Chris shrugged off Vin's hand. Grabbing two bulletproof vests, Chris tossed one to Buck who caught it silently and began to put it on. The two men hooked small microphones on their vests, keeping the line open and removed their guns.

"Chris."

He turned to the voice and gazed at the sharpshooter. Vin's face was usually readable to Chris, but he could not detect anything in his azure eyes.

"Good luck pard," and clapped Chris on the shoulder.

"Thanks Vin," Chris said and returned the gesture. "We're going to need it."

Chris and Buck slowly and cautiously approached the car with their hands raised. They could see Jack sitting on the driver's side, stone-still.

"Jack, buddy!" Buck yelled loudly and clearly. "It's me and Chris; we're just comin' to talk to ya."

"We're unarmed," Chris shouted. They were just a few yards away and then reached their goal as Chris touched the hood of the car. He could see through the windshield that Jack's eyes had a glassy distant look.

Travers blinked once, then twice as he realized Chris was a mere four feet away. He sat still as he watched Chris move from the front of the car to the driver's side.

"Hi Jack," Chris greeted him, his voice surprisedly calm even though this situation was a calculated risk.

"Chris," Jack replied, his voice belying no emotion.

Chris leaned over and said, "A man once told me, 'A life without honor is no life at all.' I believe that the person who told me that, is still the person I'm talking to now. You don't want to do this Jack, I know you."

Tears welled up in Travers' eyes. "Things change Chris. This disease is eating me up inside! I have two years max! I will never be able to see my little girl grow up. . . or walk her down the aisle. . ." Jack looked out over the distance, his eyes filled with pain and sorrow. "The medicine took the pain away for a little bit but. . . damn it, it won't cure the inevitable will it?"

"Jack, I can't pretend to understand what you are going through," Buck answered. "No one can. But we are here for you, until the very end."

"And the end it shall be. . ."

A flash of light was the last thing Chris remembered.

"Step on Josiah!" JD urged the older man who was already breaking a number of traffic laws trying to get to their destination.

"Hush, JD! I need to concentrate here!" Josiah replied as he maneuvered his black Suburban through the streets of Denver.

They finally got to the shopping district and jumped from the car. A sea of spectators were blocking their view and they boldly shoved their way through, flashing their badges when needed. They broke through the crowd just in time to see a pillar of fire erupt from a car and stared horrified at the burning wreckage of the Dodge Neon.

The two bodies of their teammates were motionless on the ground.

Out of the corner of his eye, Josiah saw Vin running toward the burning vehicle shouting.

JD's eyes widened at the sight. "For heaven's sakes . . ."

It was plain and simple. Chris wanted out. Now. There wasn't anything wrong with him. He just wanted out and go back to his ranch and wallow in his sorrow with a bottle of whiskey.

Chris put the two day old newspaper on the food tray in front of him and leaned back in frustration. The newspapers had depicted Travers as a crazed man; they didn't know the person Chris and Buck knew. He closed his eyes as he thought back to that day.

It was pure luck, Chris thought, that the bomb that Jack Travers made did not explode completely or else the Team would have been attending his and Buck's funeral.

Instead, the force of the blast sent both of them flying. Buck received minor burns to his hands and his clothing was scorched from the heat. He had been a little further behind Chris when the bomb went off and did not receive the brunt of the explosion. He was released from the hospital later that same day.

Chris, however, had been right next to the car window. He had brought up his arms instinctively when he saw the flash of light, receiving second degree burns on his lower arms and his stomach. The hospital kept him for observation because of a concussion.

'We're damn lucky,' Chris thought to himself. The newspapers claimed it was a miracle that the two ATF agents' injuries were not more serious.

Unfortunately the same couldn't be said about Jack Travers. He received third degree burns on most of his body. The doctors had worked feverishly to try and save him, but Travers died just three hours after the blast, alone.

Chris opened his eyes, turning away from his morbid thoughts. 'I'm getting too old for this. I don't think I can take it anymore,' he thought to himself as he lazily touched the bandages around his arm and torso, a grim reminder as to how close he had been to losing his life.

::knock, knock::

"Need some company?" Vin drawled.

"I don't need company, I need to get out of here," Chris growled.  
"It's been three days."

"Damn, Chris, you're getting as bad as me," Vin said and smiled. None of the seven particularly liked the hospital and Vin was notorious in letting the staff know just how much he hated it.

Chris glared at him and turned away. He wasn't angry at Vin; he was angry at himself. Angry that he couldn't prevent Jack from taking his own life. 'What a tragic story,' he thought. Here was this man, who in many ways was like Chris, strong and fiercely loyal. But when he was faced with a terminal disease, he cracked and took the easy way out.

The others had visited him regularly, to the point of driving him crazy. Ezra even stopped by after he was released. Seeing them only strengthen his resolve to go ahead with his decision. He absently started picking at the lint on the blanket as he fought to control his emotions. It just was too much. Chris had lost his wife and son to a car bombing, now he had lost a friend to one. He was determined not to lose anyone again, even if it meant he had to shut himself from everything he held dear.

Two days later, Chris strode purposefully through the waiting area and knocked on Judge Travis' office.

"Come in!"

Chris opened the door and casually looked around the office. It was decorated with mementos from Mary and Billy and also sported a nice collection of books off to the side. He stood in front of the Judge's desk and waited.

Judge Travis looked up from the mounds of paperwork on his desk.  
"Chris, what can I do for you?"

Wordlessly, Larabee handed him a neatly folded piece of paper. There was a strange expression in the old man's eyes as he took the paper and unfolded it. He frowned visibly after reading it's contents.

"You sure about this Chris?"

"I failed him Judge. I wasn't able to protect him or the others from getting hurt," Chris voice cracked slightly but he was determined to go through with his decision. "If I can't protect my team, then I don't deserve to wear this." Chris plucked his badge from his pocket and set it

on the desk.

Travis looked up at him impassively, but inside, he was in turmoil. He knew how much Larabee cared for his team and knew the depth that he would go to protect them. He didn't count on the fact that Chris would go as far as quitting though. "Alright. Now get out of here."

Chris blinked. He didn't think it was going to be so easy. The Judge was a tough man; he could convince a person that the world was flat if he wanted to. He took a final glance around the office as it for this would be the last time he would see it.

"It's been an honor working with you Judge." Chris gave him the familiar two fingered salute and walked out the door.

Travis watched his retreating back and leaned back in his chair. He probably should have said something, tried to convince Chris to stay, but he knew his arguments would fall on deaf ears. Only six other men could convince Larabee to change his mind. He pressed his intercom key for his secretary. "Janice?"

"Yes Judge Travis?"

"Call Team Seven's secretary Staci, and have her tell the team I want to see them in the conference room in an hour."

"Yes sir."

Judge Travis stared back down at the sheet of paper. Never did he believe he would see the day when Chris Larabee resigned.

Five men sat around the conference room table. They anxiously waited for the meeting to begin, particularly since Judge Travis called it. They were also worried that Chris or Ezra hadn't come in yet.

"Has anyone seen either of them?" JD asked worriedly.

Buck shook his head. "Last time I saw Chris was at the ranch last night. But he seemed. . . I don't know, distant."

"He's been like that all week ever since. . . " JD took a fevered glance in Buck's direction. "Well you know."

"Hell, I know Kid," Buck replied sadly. "Can't say that I'm takin' it well either. Jack was a good man." Buck closed his eyes briefly. Travers' memory would always be tainted with the actions he committed over the past year. It saddened Buck that others would not remember what Jack did early in his career, but remember only the end. "Chris will be fine; it will take awhile."

"And you know Ezra," Nathan added. "Always late."

"Fashionably late," a southern voice drawled as Ezra walked in. He grimaced slightly as he took his seat.

"That wound still botherin' you Ez?" Nathan asked. It was Standish's first day back and Nathan was going to make sure he took it easy.

Standish shot him a look. "I'm feeling quite fine, thank you."

Nathan smiled evilly. "Good. You've been put on desk duty for the next two weeks."

"Two weeks?!" Ezra exclaimed shocked. The others jumped back slightly not expecting Ezra to be so vocal.

"Aw hell, Ez," Vin drawled with a half smile on his face. "I reckon it wouldn't be too bad."

Vin was saved from a retort from the Southerner when Judge Travis walked in. "Gentlemen."

"Judge," Josiah greeted. "I'm sorry, but Chris isn't here yet. .  
."

"I know," Travis replied and was met by their curious glances. He removed the letter from his jacket pocket and set it on the table. "This morning Larabee handed me his resignation."

That was the last thing the six men expected to hear. At first there was silence, then the room exploded with questions and demands why.

Vin, who was the closest, picked up the letter and read it for himself. His hands visibly shook at the emotional words that Chris penned on paper why he decided to resign.

'There comes a time in a man's life when he realizes he's too tired to continue. This job means a lot to me, not only because it gives me a purpose in life, but because of the friendships I have forged in our three years together as a team. But when I endanger the team by not acting on my gut instincts, it's time to hang up the spurs and move on.'

Vin couldn't read the letter any more. He quickly folded the piece of paper and pushed it away from him.

"He resigned?!" Buck yelled in aghast.

"He's. . . he quit? Just like that?" JD said sadly. "I would have never thought that he'll abandon us."

"Gentlemen!" the Judge yelled, trying to gain some control over the meeting. He picked up the letter and tore in two. "I don't intend to accept this letter."

The chattering immediately stopped.

"Why?" Nathan asked not expecting the turn of events.

Travis sat down in a chair. "This team is too important just to let me sit back and see it dissolve right in front of my eyes. I realize how important you are to each other. If one goes, all of you will falter; I know that much. I don't want to see this team broken up no more than any of you."

The Judge smiled ruefully. "I trust you won't let that happen."

The six men glanced at each other with small smiles. The Judge was giving them a chance to make things right. They were not about to waste any time.

"I believe we can do that," Josiah said with a glint in his eye. "Can't be any harder than some cases we've worked on."

"Maybe just a bit harder," Buck responded a little worried. "You know how stubborn Chris is."

"Then we just have to come up with a plan," Vin added.

"Do whatever it takes gentlemen," Travis said as he stood up. "I'll put your team on research duty for the next week. That should clear up some time for you."

"Thank you Judge," JD said.

Travis just smiled and gave them a two fingered salute before disappearing through the door.

JD turned back to his friends. "Anyone got any ideas?"

The members of Team Seven were starting to fray at the edges. It had been almost a week, and still not one of them had gotten through to the hard headed Chris Larabee. He had refused all logical arguments on the reasons why to come back, clearly stating his actions had put the team in danger.

"I don't want to go through that again," Chris had stated clearly to Buck when they had talked a couple of days ago.

"He's not coming back, is he?" JD asked abruptly one day when four of them were in the break room.

The others looked at him sharply.

"No," Vin replied vehemently. "He'll be back."

"It's been a week," JD countered, his voice slightly cracking.

"He'll be back," Vin repeated, though more to himself than to JD. The sharpshooter had faith that Chris would return. In fact, it was all he had at the moment.

None of the Seven had been coping well with Chris' absence. Their shoulders slumped further each passing day, dark circles appeared under work weary eyes, and their minds were definitely elsewhere.

"I. . . I just don't want to see this team fall apart," JD said haltingly, and quickly made his exit, embarrassed that he lost face in front of them.

Vin sighed as JD rushed out of the room, tears flowing freely down from his young face. "I'll go after him."

"Now what?" Nathan asked as the two youngest team members



disappeared.

"Faith brother," Josiah said as he watched Vin go after a distraught JD. "We gotta have faith."

Buck strode into Chris' office, the emptiness of the place acute. Normally Chris's presence dominated the room, his strong personality demanded your attention. But not on this day. Today it just felt empty.

Buck played with the spur on the desk, twiddling it between his thumbs. He trailed his finger over the dust that had collected on the desk and reviewed the events that had accumulated to this. It still hurt to think about Jack Travers, a man that he knew well, had countless adventures with, dead at the age of forty-two.

And Chris reverting back to when Sarah and Adam were killed.

"Buck?"

He turned at the sound of his name being called and saw Ezra standing in the door way. "Are you alright Mr. Wilmington?"

Buck snickered. "Do I look alright?"

Ezra walked into the office and plucked the item from Buck's grasp. He recognized the spur that Buck had given to Chris and Vin. The Southerner sighed deeply as he returned the item to its proper place and watched as Buck sunk into the leather chair.

"Oh, I don't know," Buck said sadly as he leaned back in the chair, tired. He looked at Ezra who was leaning against Chris' empty desk.

"I really don't get it Ez. There is nothing more important to Chris than this team. Yet he still. . ." Buck trailed off not really wanting to say what he was thinking. "JD's losing hope, \*I'm\* losing hope. . ."

"It's that kind of attitude that will get us no where Buck," Ezra answered.

"I know, I know. . ." Buck said and closed his eyes, wanting to shut the pain out. "Why would he abandon us?"

Ezra sighed deeply; it hurt to see Buck so distraught. As he brought up his hand to massage his aching muscles, he accidentally knocked over one of the pictures on Chris' desk.

When he moved to put it back, the undercover agent paused for a moment, gazing forlornly at the picture. He had to smile, as the memory of that day came rushing back to him. Suddenly it all clicked into place. He knew exactly what to say and hopefully turn around the dark mood Chris Larabee was in. "Maybe its about time we teach Mr. Larabee what courage really means," Ezra mentioned softly as he showed the picture to Buck.

He was dreaming again. This time he was standing beside a headstone; the names of his wife and son carved into the black granite. It was

raining, causing the letters to become a muddle, dark gray. He closed his eyes, reigning in his feelings of grief at the loss of his family. Chris suddenly felt a presence beside him and turned around.

"Why the long face my love?" Sarah asked her husband. Miraculously, she seemed

untouched by the raindrops and exuded a soft ethereal light.

"Isn't it obvious? You're there, and I'm here."

"But you have friends, Chris. Friends who care deeply about you and want to be part of your life." She raised her hand to his face and turned his toward hers. "I'm sorry that Adam and I can't be there with you my love. But we'll always be here," and she moved her hand over his heart. "And I know there is room there for six men too."

Sarah moved away from him. "Do you want to be alone Chris? I know I would hate to see you alone."

Chris' eyes flew open as his dream ended abruptly, yet Sarah's words echoed in his tormented mind. It had been days since he last shaved, his face stubbly as he ran his hand over his chin. The dream had felt so real, so vivid that he could actually still feel the warmth of Sarah's hand when she touched his chest. He did so now, the heartache at missing his friends was tangible.

Their visits had been non-stop all week. Chris didn't expect anything less from them. In fact, he would have questioned them if they hadn't been so persistent. A knock at his door interrupted his thoughts and Chris groaned slightly. He wondered who it would be this time, Buck or Vin. 'Or maybe they threw a curveball and decided to send JD.'

He slowly made his way across the worn planks of the wooden floor, ever minded the hollow sound each footstep made. The ranch had always felt empty ever since his wife and son's death. No longer were there the pitter-patter of Adam's feet as he ran across the floor, greeting his father when he came home.

The person pounded on the door again, more insistently this time. "Comin'!" Chris yelled, but whoever it was decided to continue. He threw open door and began to yell, "Whatever it is. . ."

"Ah, finally Mr. Larabee," Ezra greeted his friend and leader merrily. "I thought I would have gotten a cold if I stood out here any longer." The undercover agent strode past a shocked Chris Larabee who stood there open-mouthed. He was surprised to see the Southerner was even up at such an early hour.

Chris recovered from his initial shock rather well. "Ezra, it's September," he managed to say out loud as he followed Ezra to the kitchen.

"Have you had breakfast yet?" Ezra asked, ignoring Chris' statement.

"No. . ."

Chris replied slowly unsure of how to react to Ezra's

presence. It was rare that Ezra would come over uninvited or act so mysterious. He watched silently as Ezra extracted some items from a brown paper bag: some bagels, cream cheese, and a two cups of orange juice.

"What are you doing here Ez?" Chris finally asked the Southerner since it was apparent Ezra wasn't going to start talking any time soon.

"Isn't it obvious Mr. Larabee?" Ezra replied as he removed the last item from the bag and held it out to him. "I'm the messenger."

Chris was surprised at what the Southerner was holding in his hand. With an almost childlike movement, he slowly reached out for the rectangular piece of wood and looked at it longingly.

Ironical that Ezra would choose this photograph to bring with him. It was the picture of them at the Four Corners Harvest Festival in which each of them dressed like the gunslingers of the Old West. The same one he and Vin had been discussing a week ago. A small smile flitted on his features, but then faded when he remembered what happened after that.

He put it down on the table and paced around the room, and Ezra observed the tortured man silently.

"You know," Ezra began, "I'm usually never the one to hand out advice Mr. Larabee, but this isn't an exactly 'usual' situation, is it?"

"Make your point Ez," said Chris, looking at him with a predatory gleam in his green eyes.

The suave undercover agent matched Chris' steely gaze. "Where's your courage Chris?"

Chris almost balked at Ezra's use of his first name. His anger started to boil at the audacity of the question. "What the hell do you mean?" he growled as he grabbed the collar of Ezra's Armani jacket.

Ezra seemed unfazed by Chris' actions. "There are two kinds of people in this life, my friend. Those who seek battle and seem not to fear death, and those who avoid battle, but will stand and fight to the death if their loved ones are threatened."

"Then there's the third kind," Ezra stated smoothly, as Chris slowly relinquished his hold on the brash agent as his words began to sink in. "I would hate to think that you fell into that category."

Chris looked at him as if he was staring at a stranger. 'Since when did Ezra become so poetic?' He turned away from the Southerner and walked toward the window. Sarah's words once again echoed in his mind and mingled with what Ezra had just said.

"It takes courage, Chris, to forge a friendship and continue with it. I'll admit, I don't have many friends. But you invited me to stick around and we have become more than friends Chris; we're family." He approached Chris, and gently laid his hand on his shoulder. "You gave me a second chance Chris," Ezra stated in a low voice, one filled

with emotion. He saw the tumultuous emotions play over his friend's face. "Why don't you do the same for us?"

Chris turned around, tears beginning to brim his eyes. He was mildly surprised to find that Ezra's face mirrored his own. As he gazed into those emerald depths, he realized just how closely tied the seven of them were.

Vin Tanner was the sharpshooter; his quiet and assuming presence spoke volumes. Josiah Sanchez was the preacher; his open mind listened to the troubles and secrets the six of them entrusted him with, yet managed to hand out advice, no matter how dire the straits were. Buck Wilmington was the ladies man, but always there when you needed him. JD Dunne was the Kid; he represented the innocence each of the men once had and yearned to return to. Nathan Jackson was the healer; his calming influence and uncanny knowledge in the medical field probably saved their lives more than once. Ezra Standish was the undercover agent; he always had an Ace up his sleeve and could talk his way out of a volatile situation. And him, Chris Larabee, the leader in this group of seven seemingly different men, somehow managed to have them work together as a team.

It was a bond that went beyond family. It was like they each shared the same soul, the same purpose; to protect the innocent and to forge through the world, together. And Chris realized without him, it would fall apart.

It was their annual poker night, this time at the infamous CDC. The mood was somber as each team member trudged in, bringing goodies with them. A favorite of theirs was Josiah's five alarm chili.

"How did talkin' to Chris go?" Buck asked Ezra as he dumped the potato chips in a bowl.

"Surprisingly well Mr. Wilmington," Ezra answered as he carried a plate of sushi for him and Vin. "Actually, I was surprised I didn't get sucker punched by the things I said."

"What did you say anyway?" Vin drawled as he took up on Ezra's offering and popped one in this mouth.

The undercover agent just smiled and took his seat. It was obvious to the men that what happened earlier would stay between Chris and Ezra. "Alright gentlemen, the game is five card stud, deuces are wild. .  
."

As Ezra dealt the cards, the doorbell chimed. The men glanced at each other as Buck stood up and answered the door.

Chris stood there, a case of beer by his side. "Can I come in?"

Buck's smile could have chased the Devil away. "Any time pard, any time."

Vin went ahead and grabbed a chair for Chris as the two walked over to the poker table. The transformation in Chris was obvious. He looked enlightened, as if he understood the Seven's destiny.

"Well," Ezra said as he re-shuffled and re-dealt the cards, "as I

said, deuces are wild, other than that, the sky's the limit."

One week later. . .

Everyone was over at Chris' ranch, celebrating Chris' return with a get together. They had planned to go riding, and were in the barn preparing for the ride. The sounds of Buck and JD's bickering floated down from the loft to the rest of the men, who were preparing the horses.

"You don't toss hay like that JD, or else you're gonna throw out your back."

"Oh and how would you know? You've barely picked up your pitchfork."

Chris laughed as the argument continued. He couldn't imagine going a day without that sound, yet a week ago, he nearly did.

"What are you thinkin' about pard?" Vin asked his best friend.

"I'm counting my blessings," Chris replied as he finished preparing Black. He still had a long way to go to put the ghost of Jack Travers from his mind, but now he knew cutting off his friends was not the answer. It was time to face those problems head on with his adopted family.

Suddenly, a shrill cry came from above. "Look out!"

Chris and Vin looked up just in time to see Nathan get doused by a confection of hay. The healer spit out a piece that managed to find its way into his mouth and swatted the ones that resided in his hair.

Josiah, Chris, and Vin started to laugh and so did Buck and JD. Ezra peeked his head from above. "I'm so sorry Mr. Jackson," Ezra drawled in his most sympathetic voice although his face betrayed his true feelings. "Manual labor is just not my forte. . ."

Nathan looked at him with mock contempt. "Just wait till I get my hands on you. . ." and he began to climb up the ladder.

"Although," Chris stated with a smile on his lips. "I think Ezra is gonna need it more than I do."

The End

End  
file.